

TEACHERS' RE-TRAINING AS A MEANS FOR PROFESSIONAL IMPROVEMENT: A CASE STUDY IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The study of the teachers' re-training could support the teachers' image as good professionalist, competent, aiming to be useful for the students' by means of own improvement. Two cases of implementation of teachers' training programmes on the topics of use of computers in education and work with pupils with special educational needs in Bulgaria are described. These were among the most preferred topics of teachers' continuing education. In total, 54 teachers took part in the training programmes. Their effectiveness was measured by means of the teachers' results on the exams, the chosen topics for preparation of the course projects, the different approaches to the similar topics, sharing of own experience by the teachers, and the time period of the training.

Key words: case study, professional development, re-training, teachers.

Introduction

Provision of equal education opportunity for all students requires properly certified and trained teachers (Hand, 2004). Teacher's education encompasses preparation of teachers, and improvement of teachers' knowledge and students' learning outcomes through action-based classroom research and reflective practice (Hamston, Risko & Ellis, 2006). The teachers should be informed about the new scientific achievements, and their practice should be based on research evidence. The high educational standards require constant development. Professional development is also referred to as continuing education, re-training, and lifelong learning (Tarnowski & Murphy, 2003).

Community members look favorably on teachers who take steps to improve themselves (Hyman, 1990). Professional development is perceived positively by the society, but it is time-consuming for the teachers, headmasters and it is sometimes paid by the school budget. As a consequence, a smaller number of teachers in high-poverty, high minority schools are supported by their schools for professional development (Fewer Hours, Fewer Results, 2010).

Effective professional development is ongoing (at least 50 hours per year), and connected to practice, school initiatives, and specific academic content (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). It takes between five to eight years to master the teaching skills (Scherer, 2001). For professional development to have significant effects on students' achievement, teachers need at least 49 hours on a given topic and at least 100 hours in math and science (Fewer Hours, Fewer Results, 2010).

Research findings indicate that teachers in many nations are provided with 100 hours of professional development time each year (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). This long-lasting re-training supposes quality of implementation of the acquired knowledge and skills in teachers' practice.

There are three mechanisms through which good teaching practices in schools might be defined and developed - the official criteria for good practice of some national and international bodies; the personal criteria of the teachers' views of good practice; and the institutional criteria of schools (Ruthven, 2005).

There are five professional degrees for Bulgarian teachers that are the official criteria for good practice at Bulgarian national level. Each of them requires some length of practice teaching. The teacher should take some additional exams, to preparing and publishing one or more papers, and to indicate which awards had been won by their pupils. The first professional degree has the smallest number of requirements, the fifth – the biggest number of requirements (DIUU, 2012).

Research Focus

There is little information about what the teachers perceive to be essential for their own professional development (Tarnowski & Murphy, 2003). Such information could be found when studying the preferred topics of re-training.

The teachers in USA participated the most frequently in six professional development topics in 2004 and 2008 - 1) The content of the subject(s) they teach; 2) Uses of computers for instruction; 3) Reading instruction; 4) Student's discipline and management in the classroom; 5) Teaching students with disabilities; 6) Teaching English language learners (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). According to another source, the preferred professional development topics in USA remained the same from 2004 to 2008 - content knowledge, classroom management, students with special needs, and technology (Fewer Hours, Fewer Results, 2010). Some teachers emphasize the use of computers as general instructional resources for different subjects at different educational levels (Aiken & Snelbecker, 1991). 42% of teachers in USA reported access to professional development on teaching students with disabilities (Fewer Hours, Fewer Results, 2010). These findings indicate the relevance of such topics as the use of computers in education and work with pupils with special educational needs for teachers' re-training. That is why two teachers' training programmes on these topics in Bulgaria were described as the focus of this study.

Methodology of Research

Two collective case studies (Tellis, 1997) were applied - two groups were studied during an intervention in the form of two training programmes. These were two case studies of typical representatives (Droesbeke, 2006, 27) - the members of each group were some typical representatives of Bulgarian teachers. The case study designs were a B-A design and a C-A design (Haydon & Hunter, 2011), where B and C mean two different interventions; A means measurement. The teachers' activities during the trainings were observed and the products (the papers) that they created at the end of the training were described in brief. Cross-case analysis was applied (Soy, 1997) searching for some similarities and differences between the participants.

Case One

The children with special educational needs in Bulgaria were often isolated or sent in special schools. The contemporary educational goals require the pupils with special educational needs to be integrated in the comprehensive schools. Their integration should start even at pre-school age.

The teachers meet a lot of difficulties in their work with children with intellectual disabilities, children with hyperkinetic syndrome and attention deficit, children with delayed mental development, etc. Such kinds of children in Bulgaria are often stigmatized as "not subject to training" and they become a part of the group of educationally neglected children if their parents have low educational level or they do not have the financial resources to pay to the specialists who will work with their children.

Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science created an operative programme “Development of human resources 2007-2013” that permitted to the scientific organizations, schools and municipalities to apply with some projects for teachers' re-qualification (Ministerstvo na obrazovaniето I naukata, n.d).

43 teachers from the comprehensive and special schools in the municipality of Velingrad, Bulgaria were trained for work with children with special educational needs, as well as with their parents on the programme “Development of human resources 2007-2013” in 2012-2013 by an interdisciplinary team of psychologists and pedagogues.

Training included the modules:

1. Social-educational aspects of education and socialization of the children with special educational needs;

The teachers dealt with the problems of integration, socialization and education of the children with special educational needs.

2. Mental peculiarities of the children with special educational needs;

The teachers were informed about normal and abnormal mental development. The emphasis was put on the factors causing the harm, delayed maturation or dysfunction of neural system – hereditary, traumatic, and environmental. The anomalies in mental development were presented in accordance with ICD-10 (*International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th Revision (ICD-10)*, 2010).

The teachers were acquainted with some children who had emotional and social difficulties. They are called “desadapted children” (*Deteto – pedagogicheskо konsultirane na roditeli I acutely*, 2013), because they have some deviations in their emotional, intellectual, moral, and social development, and they have difficulties in integration in the class, group, and school community.

3. Psychological consulting and support of pupils with special educational needs;

The goal of this module was the teachers to acquire knowledge and develop skills for psychological consultation of children with special educational needs, especially in the cases of low self-esteem, high anxiety and deviant behaviour.

4. Methods for psychological assessment of children with special educational needs;

The goal of this module was the teachers to get acquainted with some questionnaires for psychodiagnostics of mental functions and processes of children with special educational needs.

5. Psychological consultation and support for the parents of children with special educational needs;

This module includes some roleplay games for the formation of competences in teachers in partnership with the parents of the children with special educational needs; development of skills for coping with the feelings of the parents of the children with special educational needs. The teachers should master skills for educating the parents who to work at home with their children. The teachers were informed about the models of interaction between the parent and the specialist; the role of the family in the educational process. The teachers mastered some skills for research of family functioning.

6. A module for the teachers at the special schools

The goal of this module is mastering of some skills for consultation and support of pupils with multiple disabilities and their parents by means of discussions and role-play games.

Each module had 15 hours theory and 15 hours practice.

As the result of this training, each teacher prepared one paper describing his/her work with children with special educational needs and their parents or the intended way of implementation in practice of the acquired knowledge and skills.

Case Two

11 teachers studied two specializations (Current problems of education in IT technologies, or Application of IT technologies in educational process) for achieving a next professional degree (third) in South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria in 2013. Each specialization lasted for one year (two semesters) and included ten courses. As a part of the course in "Psychological and pedagogic problems of computer-based education" (15 hours lectures), they chose to work on the topics:

- "Negative influence of IT technologies on health status" ($N=3$),
- "The goals of using IT technologies in education" ($N=2$),
- "Influence of Internet on social life of personality" ($N=2$),
- "Advantages of education via Internet" ($N=1$),
- "Motivation of study in literature via Internet in the pupils in 11th grade" ($N=1$),
- "IT technologies in education in Bulgarian language in 11th grade" ($N=1$);
- "Advantages of application of IT technologies in education of the pupils in elementary school" ($N=1$).

Each of them prepared one paper reporting the results from one or more studies and s/he has passed an exam on the chosen topic. They shared their personal experience. One of them explained a case of a 15-year-old pupil who always did only the half of his homework, because he needed only to pass his exams, and if his notes were high, the other students would think he was a nerd. This was a case of conformity with the group of friends and fear of success.

Discussion

As one author states, the expert teachers have case knowledge. They compare situations and figure out what to do (Scherer, 2001). The reports of own experience related to the teachers' practice and its explanation give evidence for the positive results from teachers' re-training.

The results from re-training of the experienced teachers are measured by course exams, course projects, and course grades (Snelbecker & Bhote, 1995), as in the described cases of the teachers' re-training. All the participants had positive and high results from their exams and course projects.

To be successful in a re-training program, participants need good backgrounds in formulating problems and thinking critically about alternate solutions (Aiken & Snelbecker, 1991). The participating teachers from Bulgaria presented different approaches to similar topics that indicated their creativity and competence.

Another proof for the effectiveness of the re-training programme is its form. There are different forms of teachers' re-training.

The least effective models of professional development are short-term workshops that are unlikely to influence practice and students' achievement (*Fewer Hours, Fewer Results*, 2010). The described cases of teachers' re-training were long-lasting and corresponded to the required minimum academic hours for effective training, as well as to the preferred topics for professional qualification in the other countries (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010; *Fewer Hours, Fewer Results*, 2010). Some authors consider that the teachers in different nations participate in workshops and short-term professional development events at similar levels (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010).

Teachers may develop professionally by creating lists of "What I Do Well" and "What I'd Like to Do Better". There is a great deal of similarity among the goals for elementary teachers at all grade levels – conducting better conferences; improving lessons and adding some new themes; improving students' revision, editing and writing strategies; being better at modeled writing and increasing the amount of published work by the teacher and his/her students; conducting more studies; improving own assessment techniques; being better at explanations (Aaland & Manning, 1991).

Peer coaching as a way of teachers' training is based on several premises like - teachers have the ability to help each other; teachers trust other teachers to lead them to positive change in the form of mastered skills for effective observation, feedback, and interpretation of classroom action (Hyman, 1990).

Conclusion

Teachers should talk about their achievements, their best instructional practices, and the expertise of colleagues, supporting them at all costs in public. They should keep up with the professional information available in their field. They should attempt to raise the public's perception of the teaching profession by making informed professional judgments, dressing (looking) professional, supporting teachers publicly in order to convince the public that they are among the most important professionals in the world (Glazer, 1995).

The study of the teachers' re-training could support the teachers' image as good professionalist, competent, aiming to be useful for the students' by means of own improvement.

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